

An estimated 2,000 Jains reside in Belgium, concentrated in and around the city of Antwerp. Within Antwerp, the focal point of community life is the suburb of Wilrijk. Although Jain individuals and families have made their homes in other European countries as well, Belgium is the only country in continental Europe that has the required density and numbers to have established an organized Jain cultural and religious community. This group of Jains has ties with the Jains in the United Kingdom, the United States, India, and elsewhere, but their situation in Belgium is quite unique, due to their relatively uniform regional background and almost exclusive employment in the Antwerp diamond sector.

#### History and Development of the Belgian Jain Community (H1)

The first individual Indian merchant to travel to the port city of Antwerp, which had been a center of diamond trade since the 15th century, was recorded in 1916. The number of Indian migrants remained fairly low until the diamond trade came to a halt during World War II. Migration of Indian (mostly Jain) traders recommenced and rose steadily from the 1950s onward. Whereas the earliest traders were itinerant merchants, only coming to buy and sell on the Antwerp market for trade companies in India and elsewhere, Kirtilal Manilal Mehta changed this pattern when he founded the first Indian diamond-trade company in Belgium in 1953.

Trying to find a place for themselves on the existing diamond scene dominated by Jewish traders, the first arrivals specialized in the trade of very small rough diamonds, which was a market segment not considered profitable enough to be of interest to the established diamond community at the time. Starting from that fringe of the market, the Indian businessmen, the majority of whom were Jain, gradually rose to a prominent position in the Antwerp diamond trade. The Indian share in revenues rose from 2% in 1968 to 25% in 1980 and to 65% in 2003 (Kapur, 2010, 100). From the 1970s onward, the type of migration changed from circular business migration almost exclusively by male individuals to a more settled form of migration, in which an increasing number of firms or branches of existing firms set up in Antwerp and wives and families joined the businessmen. Throughout the following decades, more Jains started arriving, and the community gradually grew to the 350–400 families currently living in Belgium.

The Jain community in Antwerp is still very much interwoven with the diamond trade. This affects the way in which the Jains have settled in Belgium and the ways in which they interact with broader Belgian society. On the one hand, many businessmen have obtained Belgian citizenship and describe themselves as “Belgian”; on the other hand, their intense

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involvement in the fluctuating international diamond trade seems to have resulted in a lingering feeling of impermanence. When the market changes, companies might move to different countries, resulting in the uprooting of businessmen and their families. It is very common for businessmen to divide their time among multiple countries (typically India, Belgium, and, increasingly, Dubai). This also explains the predilection for primary, secondary, and higher education in English. By default, English is not the primary language in Belgian education, as all the schools recognized and sanctioned by the government operate in the official language of the region (for Antwerp, this is Dutch). The only “English medium” schools are the few international schools, which find their students among the children of expats active in the diplomatic, political, or business sphere.

Perhaps again because of their origins as a business community and the concomitant feeling of impermanence, it took quite a while for the community to establish a formal organizational presence. Despite the long absence of formal organization, Jains in Belgium did meet to engage in religious or cultural activities. Indeed, as soon as wives and families came to join the first pioneers in the 1970s, families organized *sāmāyik* (meditation) and *svādhyāy* (study) sessions for adults and/or children at their homes. Those from a Derāvāsī (icon-worshipping) background had

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house temples installed and conducted rituals there. Some families hosted learned *paṇḍits* (scholars) that they knew from India in their homes and invited their Jain acquaintances to come and interact with them.

Additionally, many Jains were (and are) connected to the broader Indian community through the Antwerp Indian Association (AIA).

The number of informally organized activities within the Jain community grew as time went by and the community grew in numbers. By the early 1990s, the need for a more formal organization along religious and cultural lines gave rise to the establishment of two specifically Jain cultural organizations that remain active until today: the Jain Cultural Centre of Antwerp (JCCA) and a branch of Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur (SRCD). Both organizations provide an umbrella under which the previously informally organized *sāmāyik* and *bhakti* (devotional singing) groups can function, and both run *pāṭhśālā* (religious school) classes for children under the guidance of volunteer teachers. The JCCA established the only Jain temple on the European mainland, which has become the primary focal point for the Jain community since it opened in 2010.

The vast majority of the Belgian Jains hail from Gujarat and are connected by a dense web of historically grown family ties; a large group has their

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origins in the city of Palanpur in north Gujarat. Typically, the men are active in diamond trade, the women manage the home, and many of the children are in English-language international schools in Antwerp, Mol, or Brussels. Roughly half of the Jains in Belgium today have a Śvetāmbara Derāvāsī background, and half are Sthānakavāsī (the Sthānakavāsī eschew the worship of Jina icons). There are about ten families of Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī Jains (also aniconic) and two or three families of Digambara Jains. In general, the Jains in Antwerp have maintained a strong sense of community and shared culture because of the low level of intermarriage with non-Indians and even with non-Jains, the dense concentration of Jains living in the same neighborhood, and the relative homogeneity of the community. Members of the community indicate that although many are strict in their observance of custom and dietary rules, there is little spiritual inclination among the Jains in Belgium, meaning that a deep involvement with the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of the Jain tradition is rare. During the last 20 years, the makeup of the community has begun to change, as a significant number of the initial Palanpur migrants have shifted to Mumbai and Dubai to further business interests. Meanwhile, comparatively recent arrivals have come in from other villages in south Gujarat and Kachchh. They are considered to have a very different background as their migration history, region of origin, and often also

occupation are different from those of the majority of the Belgian Jain community. A handful of Jains are settled in other cities in Belgium, like Brussels or Ghent (both roughly 60 km from Antwerp). Although all of them occasionally visit the temple (typically for festivities during *paryuṣaṇa*, the autumnal ritual of confession), they too consider themselves to be somewhat set apart from the majority of the community in Antwerp, because they are active in different economic sectors, such as information technology, retail, and diplomacy, or have different regional or sectarian backgrounds. More diversification is also occurring as members of the younger generations pursue higher education and professional careers in other sectors.

#### **The Jain Cultural Centre of Antwerp and the Shankheshwar Parshvanath Jain Temple (H1)**

#### **History and Development of the Jain Cultural Centre of Antwerp (H2)**

The Jain Cultural Centre Antwerp (JCCA) was established in 1992 as a not-for-profit organization with the express purpose of establishing a meeting place for Jains in Belgium. The organization is run by a committee of 12 diamond dealers who were instrumental in the processes of fundraising, land purchase, planning, and commissioning for the cultural center and temple complex. Unlike in most Jain organizations and temples in the

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United Kingdom and United States, there are no regular elections for the board of the JCCA. The initial committee is still in charge of the daily running of the cultural center, although many of them spend a lot of time abroad or have moved to Mumbai or Dubai, making meetings of the full body rather rare. Although some members of the community would like to see more opportunities for the younger generations to get involved in the management of the organization, many also feel a strong sense of obligation toward the members of the committee for all their work and investment in the temple complex.

## **Shankheshwar Parshvanath Jain Temple and Cultural Centre (H2)**

### **Making a Space for Jainism in Belgium (H3)**

After the opening of the first Jain center in Europe in Leicester (UK) in 1988, fundraising for a Jain temple on the European mainland began in the early 1990s. It was one of the main purposes of the JCCA. They eventually purchased 3,000 m<sup>2</sup> of land in the Laarstraat in the suburb of Wilrijk, which first consisted exclusively of cricket fields. Construction for the planned Shankheshwar Parshvanath Jain Temple and Cultural Centre began with the ceremonial laying of the first stone in 1996, and for some time, a temporary temple space was built on site to serve until the actual temple was

consecrated. The name Shankheshwar Parshvanath refers to the main icon, depicting a specific form of the 23rd Tirthankara Parśvanātha that is much visited and venerated at the Śaṅkeśvara Pārśvanātha shrine in **north Gujarat**. The *añjan śalākā* (the “eye-opening” ritual said to enliven an icon) ceremonies were conducted in 2007 near Vijapur in Gujarat, and the consecration of the temple with the *pratiṣṭhā* (the ritual of consecration) of the icon took place in Antwerp on Aug 27, 2010. This is commemorated yearly by organizing the *dhvajārohaṇa* or flag-hoisting ceremony on this day.

The now finished temple complex at Laarstraat is presented as a cultural center. Next to the 300-m<sup>2</sup> temple is an *upāśray* (space for the performance of collective rituals that are not focused on a Jina icon) of 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>, with an office, a library, an audiovisual classroom, a kitchen and dining area downstairs, and a meditation room that seats just under 1,000 people on the first floor. The JCCA employs someone for the day-to-day administration and three Hindu *pujārīs* (temple employees) for the logistics, upkeep, and running of the temple. A number of cooks are hired to be in charge of providing food for *āyambil* (a special fast) occasions and for feeding the *tapasvīs* (fasters). These cooks coordinate with volunteers that provide food made at home. The center is open to members of the community in the

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morning and again for a few hours in the evening. For non-Jain visitors, it is not easy to find information or get access to the temple. However, it is possible to visit as part of an organized guided tour. Every year, different groups from the UK Jain community also conduct *yātrās* (pilgrimages) to the temple.

### Architecture (H3)

The Shankheshwar Parshvanath Jain Temple and Cultural Centre is built out of white marble in a style inspired by the western Indian Jain temples of the 10th through 15th centuries. The stone was quarried mainly in Makrana in Rajasthan and worked near Ahmedabad. Architects in Mumbai, Italy, and Belgium coordinated to plan construction. The different elements were prepared by marble workers in India and then assembled in situ by teams of Indian construction workers with the required knowledge and experience with marble construction. The floors throughout the buildings are inlaid with semiprecious stones (using *pietra dura* techniques), and the massive teak wooden doors are decorated with reliefs of scenes in the lives of the Tīrthaṅkaras.

### Activities (H3)

Although, as noted above, it took some time to establish the cultural center and temple complex, it is now widely regarded as the focus of religious and cultural life of the community. It has become a place for different groups (Śvetāmbara Sthānakavāsī, Śvetāmbara Derāvāsī, and Digambara) to come together and an umbrella under which previously informally organized groups can function.

Different *sāmāyik* and *svādhyāy* groups meet in the rooms downstairs on a weekly basis, and every Sunday *pāṭhśālā* classes are organized. Meals are regularly served for *āyambil* and other occasions and for those who have taken a vow to fast intermittently (e.g. in March 2017, some 40 people started a *varsī tap* [a year of intermittent fasting] in celebration of the 25 years of the JCCA). Early every morning, a group of devotees comes together to perform the *snātra pūjā* (lustration ritual) in the temple. The rest of the morning sees mostly individual devotees (mainly women) come to the temple for meditation or simple *pūjā*. In the evening, both women and men come to the temple for *ārati* (worship with a lamp). The festival of *paryuṣaṇa* is the busiest time of the year for the temple and cultural center. The version of *pratikramaṇ* (confession) done during *paryūṣaṇa* is alternated annually between Sthānakavāsī and Derāvāsī. *Paryuṣaṇa* is also

the time when most *paṇḍits* and teachers tend to visit. Most of them are invited because they have some tie to one of the community members.

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The JCCA *pāṭhśālā* is conducted by volunteer teachers. The students are divided into two age groups: from 6 to 10 and from 10 onward. As the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur's Divine Touch curriculum starts from 4 years of age, this means that parents sometimes have their young children start there and then transfer them to the temple *pāṭhśālā* from 6 onward. There have been some initiatives by people active in the JCCA *pāṭhśālā* to start a younger class, but as yet no such extra group has been formally started. Classes are divided into two parts: 45 minutes of *sūtras* and 45 minutes of explanation. Compared to the Divine Touch curriculum used in the SRCD classes discussed below, the JCCA *pāṭhśālā* classes are more traditionally organized, with a stronger emphasis on doctrinal elements and *sūtras*. They eclectically follow curricula compiled by different organizations in India and sometimes also materials from the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA).

The main source of information about activities in and around the JCCA is still word of mouth and the information board at the temple entrance. Even now, the JCCA does not have a website to make its activities visible to the

broader public. The public Facebook page is maintained by one of the committee members and provides pictures and reports on past activities. Only rarely is it used to announce activities. Additionally, news is spread within the community by means of different mailing lists, and more recently, a number of WhatsApp groups have been started up to keep community members up to date and also provide a platform for communication.

#### Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Centre (Antwerp) (H1)

Unlike the JCCA, the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Centre (SRCD) in Antwerp is in fact a branch of an international organization, the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur, led by Rakeshbhai Jhaveri, who is accepted by his devotees to be a self-realized *guru*. The branch in Antwerp was the first branch of the SRCD to open overseas, after the preexisting informal group formalized in the late 1980s following a visit from Rakeshbhai Jhaveri himself. Their activities consist of ladies *satsaṅgs* (meetings consisting of reading and discussing, and sometimes also including contemplative practices) twice a week in daytime. Every other week, the group gets together for *paramsatsaṅg* (more important meeting), for which a video message of the *guru* is downloaded and viewed together. Like the parent organization in Dharampur, the Antwerp branch puts a lot of emphasis on

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social welfare and fundraising activities. In 2017, they motivated around 300 Jains to participate in the Antwerp Marathon and raise funds for the construction of a hospital in India. Also in 2017, the play *Yugpurush – Mahatma na Mahatma*, which depicts the relationship between Shrimad Rajchandra and Mahatma Gandhi, was performed for a full Zuiderkroon theatre. For children, classes are organized according to the Divine Touch curriculum set forth by the mission in India: Magic Touch for 4–8 years of age, Arhat Touch for 9–12 years of age, and Spiritual Touch for 13–16 years of age. The curriculum is set out centrally, but the material for the classes is in part prepared by the volunteer teachers themselves. Interestingly, the fundraising and *pāṭhśālā* activities of the SRCD group also attract Jains who do not accept Rakeshbhai Jhaveri as their *guru*. Many of the volunteer teachers in the *pāṭhśālā* are in fact not devotees; the action- and experience-oriented pedagogic project of the *pāṭhśālā* is considered to be more important than the individual spiritual path when it comes to getting involved. But even though non-devotees do get involved, the SRCD group is considered by some Antwerp Jains to be “outside” Jainism proper.

#### Contact with Other Communities (H1)

Although the level of integration varies widely, the way of life of many Jain families in Antwerp does not allow much room for contact with broader

Belgian society. When it comes to language, both at home and during activities, intermingled Gujarati and English are used. English is the medium of most business and education. Again, this flows from the intense involvement in the diamond sector, which is in fact almost entirely in the hands of expats (Hasidic Jews, Armenians, Indian Jains, etc.). The official language in Antwerp, Dutch, is not widely spoken in the community. The main point of contact between Jains and Belgians is children's leisure activities, as their classmates in the international schools are seldom of Belgian origin. The limited contact does not seem to be a result of conscious choice, but of lifestyle. Some individuals do try to achieve stronger ties with Belgian society. For instance, over the years, the Jains have donated money to renovate a children's hospital in Antwerp, SRCD has organized social welfare activities for the local underprivileged, money has been raised for sponsoring the study of Jainism at Belgian universities, and so on. To be able to communicate directly with local governments, the Jain community was asked to propose a spiritual leader to act as a spokesperson. They selected businessman Ramesh Mehta, who has been a full-fledged member of the Belgian Council of Religious Leaders since 2009.

Many Jains in Belgium travel back to India more than once a year and generally seem to feel more connected to Jains in Gujarat and Mumbai than

to Jains in other diasporic communities. The situation in the United Kingdom and the United States is perceived as very different because of the different migration histories and the heterogeneity of the respective communities. However, because of the proximity of the much larger UK community, there is regular contact between these two groups. Every few years, a *yātrā* to the UK temples in Leicester and London is organized for the *pāthśālā* children and adults, and many groups from the United Kingdom visit the cultural center and temple in Antwerp. The Terāpanth *samanīs* (semi-renouncers, who can travel abroad) who are stationed in London occasionally visit Antwerp to give lectures there. As many young Jains from Antwerp go to universities in the United Kingdom, this is also an important point of contact with the UK Jain community.

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#### Websites (H1)

The Jain Cultural Centre Antwerp Public Facebook Page:

[facebook.com/JainTemple.Antwerp](https://facebook.com/JainTemple.Antwerp).